

The Advent of Joy
Luke 15:11-32

Friends, this scene in the Christmas story is pretty well known, and I'd even say it's pretty well worn.

I'm sure that as we read it, this passage conjured up mental images of shepherds sitting around late at night, maybe you can imagine that the sheep are counting whatever sheep count when they have to sleep – and then there's the surprise angelic interruption which scares the shepherds half to death.

But it doesn't surprise *us* anymore - because we're so familiar with the story.

And then angel speaks to the shepherds, and says that line.

“Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.”

I'm sure it sounded much different and majestic when the angel first said it... but it's hard for me to get past all the times I've heard it repeated by some little child standing on the stage in a

Christmas pageant doing their best to deliver it in spite of suffering from either stage fright or extreme boredom.

Or maybe you've received the Christmas card version of this story...

A nice dark blue card, with the scene of some terrified sheperds cowering while a dazzling angel hovers over them, maybe there are some of the heavenly host hovering, just barely visible in the background – just waiting to burst into song...

And across the top of the card it read **JOY to the WORLD!**

Ho-hum... so nice of the minister to send me a Christmas card, stick it in the pile with all the others from the bank, the insurance company, the cleaners, etc....

What's up with this friends? What's going on when we're not overjoyed to get a Christmas card? What's happening when this passage of scripture fails to make our toes tingle when we hear it read?

Well it's quite simple – the joy has gone out of Christmas...
Like a hit song that's been overplayed on the radio.

Because friends nothing kills joy like banality and routine

Oh sure, Christmas is comfortable and predictable and safe like
an old pair of shoes – but an old pair of shoes doesn't set your
heart racing, your pulse pounding or make your chest feel like
it's going to burst...for joy!

And yet that's the description the angel uses to preface the
announcement of the birth of Christ. It's good news of great
joy!

Now you might tell me that this story is not played out for you,
but... I did not hear any "Amen's" when we read it, nobody
stood up and cheered, and don't give me the excuse that you
were "quietly joyful" - that's an oxymoron.

We might as well face the fact that for all we like about
Christmas it doesn't quite bring up the joy like it once did.

So this morning I want to do something to help us experience
exactly why this story is supposed to evoke "joy" in our hearts
so we can do as the bible says and "make a joyful noise to the
Lord!"

And to do that I need to tell you another story... an old story,
but a new one... So sit back and listen.

The pick-up truck bounced and jostled Dave around in the
passenger seat, as his father rounded the corner and accelerated
down the lane leading to the house.

It was dark out now and the snow was falling steadily, about an
inch had already accumulated on the ground – covering
everything and wherever the truck's headlights probed he could
only see a smooth blanket of white.

"It's sort of like what's happening to me" Dave thought "Dad
didn't ask any questions, about what I'd done - it's like the past
four years are just...covered over"

Dave had tried to tell his father he had messed up, that what he'd done was unforgivable and he understood if his family and his church community wouldn't take him back – but he was wondering if he could just work as a ranch hand instead.

His Dad had stood there with his arms crossed and a silly grin on his face while Dave sputtered out the lines he'd rehearsed a thousand times in his head on the bus ride home.

Half-way through his Dad had begun to laugh – Dave was confused and began to feel a bit angry but his Dad's infectious laughter disarmed him and he sheepishly asked “What's so funny?”

“No Son of mine is going to be a ranch-hand” his Dad declared “You're a Baker boy, always will be...and you've got 500 acres of family ranch that you're going to be responsible for some day!

“Dad what do you mean 500? I sold my half?” Dave confessed and winced at the memory.

“Dave I know how much land I own” his Dad gently chided him, “shortly after you left I bought back the land you sold to the developers – and here I'm giving back to you again. I think you'll do better with it this time around”

And with that his Dad reached back into the truck and handed him a crisp new manila envelope, embossed with the logo of the law firm that handled all of the Baker Ranch business.

His hands trembled as he opened it up and his jaw dropped as he saw that what he pulled out was the deed to the northern half of the family ranch – in his name!

“Come on!” His dad exclaimed “let's get you back to the house – and into the shower! You stink like fish son – what's with that anyways? I always thought you hated fish?” His dad gave him a funny look with a raised eyebrow.

Dave was still staring at the deed, speechless; he just nodded in reply. “Come on then, hop in the truck son” his Dad repeated.

Dave slid the deed back into the manila envelope and closed the flap, then he turned to face his father, “Dad” he began “I don’t deserve this...I’m mean after what I did...I don’t know what to say or how to even begin to thank you?”

“You can thank me by getting in the truck so we can get out of the snow, go home and get you a shower, – you stink son!” His dad laughed. “Come-on”

His dad walked around to the passenger side door and opened it up motioning for Dave to get in. Dave stepped up into the cab; his dad shut the door and quickly moved around the front over to the driver’s side and jumped in.

The engine roared to life as his Dad turned the key in the ignition. He put the truck in gear and spun the wheel and turned the truck around and they headed back down the highway towards home.

It had all seemed so surreal to Dave – it was only just this morning he had woken up in his run down apartment to go to

the temp agency to see if there was any more work at the pet food factory.

He looked out the passenger window and caught a glimpse of his face in the review mirror. He noticed his eyes were different now – the hopelessness he’d seen in them this morning, as he’d stared at himself in the cracked bathroom mirror, was gone.

The feeling of despair and hopelessness was gone too, and in its place a deep sense of gratitude was beginning to build,

As the truck bounced down the rough lane towards the house Dave suddenly felt a surge of excitement and joy. He was home! He was going to see his family and friends again and they were excited to see him too – if his father’s reaction was any indication.

He could feel the past four years, no... the past eight years of resentment and anger and frustration leaving him. Like a weight was being lifted off his shoulders.

How wrong he had been to resent the life he had before he left home! He hadn't known how good he had it there and with that realization all the anger and bitterness he had felt towards his family melted away and the lights of the house grew closer in the darkness.

A few seconds later the truck pulled into the yard and the Dave could hear the joyful barking of the dogs running to greet them.

His dad pulled the truck up next to the house, throwing the shifter into park and pulling the keys from the ignition in one swift practiced move.

They exited the truck together, and the dogs came bounding over to them, barking and whining in excitement, jumping over each other, ears flapping, tails wagging and tongues hanging out as they jostled each other in an attempt to get under Dave's hands and earn an affectionate rub on the head.

"Hey boys" Dave grinned "You haven't forgotten me, have you? Whoa..." He managed to dodge a slobbery kiss as one of them jumped up to lick his face. "Hey it's good to see you

again too Buster" He reached down and rubbed them both on the back of their necks.

"Well son you're home again" His Dad stated "Welcome back, and I think there's few people that have been waiting to see you!"

Dave looked up and noticed for the first time that the yard was packed with vehicles, and suddenly the door to the house flew open and the outside lights came on, surrounding him with a warm light, and a crowd of people who were laughing and cheering and clapping. "Dave's home, Dave's home" they shouted.

"David Henry Baker" his mother's voice cut through the shouting and commotion. She stood there her petite figure framed in the door way, her hands on her hips with a mischievous look on her face "I haven't seen you in four years, not a phone call, an email, nothing – and you're going to stand there and let the dogs kiss you before your mother gets a chance!? Get over here and give me a proper hug!"

Dave smiled and ran up the steps of the porch to greet his mother. “Hi mom – I’m sorry about the whole not writing thing...I’ve been a terrible son and I...” “And I’m just glad you’re home safe and sound son” His mother whispered to him and kissed him on the forehead.

She went on “Your father nearly went through the roof, he was so excited to hear that you’d come back, he’s been burning up the phone lines all evening inviting people over to have a BBQ in your honor, half the church is here and more are on the way – he even went and hauled old Jack out of the Pool Hall to have him butcher up some fresh steaks. I sure hope you’re hungry.”

Dave shook his head in astonishment, as his mother took his hand and led him inside the house. It was almost too much. How could they be so glad to see him? He hadn’t been the easiest person to get along with before he sold his share and left, yet everyone was overjoyed to see him back. It moved him.

“Go on and wash up a bit” his mother told him “I’ve put out some clean clothes for you in your old room so you can get

changed – and hurry up, we’re all waiting for you” she squeezed his hand and kissed him on the cheek again.

“Come on inside everyone, come on in” his Father instructed “We’ve got a roast pig going, there’s steak with all the fixings, potatoes and veggies, drinks and desserts, come and eat!”

The crowd began to file back inside the spacious home and gathered around the table, the kitchen help began to bring out the food.

There were dishes of candied squash, mashed potatoes, green beans and broccoli and cheese, bean salad all set around two great big serving trays.

One containing a roast pig, with the traditional apple in its mouth and another displaying two dozen or more thick and juicy steaks still sizzling from the grill.

Dave soon returned from cleaning up, looking and smelling a great deal better than he did before. His father said a quick

prayer, thanking God for the food and that his son was home again.

Then everyone began to fill their plates, the conversation and laughter started up, someone turned on the stereo and music filled the room. A few of the younger people decided they should try dancing Gangman style – which brought more laughter from those watching.

Dave looked around at the celebration, the food, the people, and his family and suddenly realized that it had been a long, long time since he had felt like this – full of joy! Real joy...and this was a real party – not at all like the kinds he used to throw.

There was no need for chemical induced highs here, no need to loose yourself in a hypnotic trance listening to a DJ, no need to make a desperate grab for intimacy in a casual relationship, there was no need for any of these things... because there was joy.

“Maybe that’s why I became so angry about my life here and left for the city” he wondered as he took a long drink of beer after finishing off his steak “I had no joy, and I thought I would find it somewhere else?”

He laughed as his Mother and Father set their plates of food down and joined in the dancing, with a bad attempt at Gangnam style – for all his good qualities, his Father was not blessed with a sense of rhythm and timing.

“It must have been me that changed somehow” he reflected, “My family seems to be the same as they’ve always been, how did I miss the joy that was here all along?”

He shook his head, the whole experience was unbelievable. He looked around again at his parents, the guests, the food, he thought about how his Dad had given him back his share of the ranch, suddenly his heart swelled with feelings of happiness and gratitude and he just couldn’t contain them anymore.

“Merry Christmas everyone” he shouted ‘It’s so good to be back home again!’ The guests cheered and clapped in

agreement and Dave set down his food and drink and joined the conga line which his mom and dad had started.

“I’m not missing out on the joy here any more” he promised himself.

Friends, doesn’t a joyful celebration like this sound so appealing? I don’t know about you but when I hear that... I want to be a party and feel joyful like that?

Because Joy is what fills up our hearts so that we feel, secure, happy, content, satisfied, fulfilled!

And when our hearts are filled with Joy there’s no room left for the burden of holding grudges, no need for the emotionally draining task of keeping score, there’s no need to watch our backs, or be preoccupied with how to get ahead of others... there’s just... JOY!

Friends my prayer for all of us is that this Christmas will fill us with Joy!

But that joy will not be derived from how much food is at the party, how wonderful the music is, or how beautiful the Christmas Eve service might be...

Don’t expect Joy to come from your career advancements, your accomplishments or your accolades.

Even the great King David got to a point where He felt empty and devoid of joy in his life and so in Psalm 51 he writes “restore unto me the Joy... of your salvation”

Salvation? Yes friends, the Joy of Christmas is the Joy of Salvation.

That’s why I shared a new version of an old story... the prodigal son – to help us get a taste of what the experience of salvation is all about and the Joy that it brings.

Friends the path to the JOY of Christmas starts with the rather unpleasant admission that each of us is the prodigal son who in some way, shape or form has walked away from what God offers us to look for our own source of Joy somewhere else...

Just as King David did when He committed adultery with Bathsheba. But when David admitted his “prodigal” ways and confessed them to God he was forgiven and his relationship with God was restored... along with his JOY

That’s why He wrote Psalm 51 – it was his journey of repentance back home to where Yahweh was waiting to receive him.

But friends, with the appearance of the angels to the shepherds to announce the birth of the Messiah, God the Father is going one step further than just waiting each day for the prodigal to come home...

In sending his only son into this world, the Father is setting out to search for them, to find them and have them **brought** home.

God enters into our world; the Word of God becomes one of us, He gets down to our level to look for us, to introduce himself to us, to save us. The JOY of his salvation.

That’s why Jesus said “*The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.*” (John 10:10)

That’s why the news of Christ’s birth is **great news**... that will bring **Joy** to the whole world!

God has come looking for us - in spite of the fact that we are off looking for joy elsewhere – in our work, in our relationships, in our holiday celebrations and vacations.

But we’ll only find the Joy that we are looking for if we are willing to believe and accept that this little baby in the manger has come for us.

If we like the shepherds, like the prodigal son say “come let us go... go and see this thing the angel has told us about, go back home and say I’ve sinned I’m not worthy to be your son, but let me work for you..

Friends – in the birth of Jesus Christ, God answers us back and says “I’ve become like you, so that you can become my child”

Welcome home! Welcome back to God's family!

Friends, that's what going on in this story with the shepherds and the angels – promise yourself today, that God helping you – you are not going to miss out anymore on the JOY that has been there all along

Let's pray